

Negative Ethics and Barbarism



Politics means applying ethical principles onto a community. The state is an institutionalized form of this intention that has constituted a monopoly to enforce morality in all its forms. Under this domination, individuals are permitted to have different opinions concerning morality, though the unrestricted freedom to express it requires a crime or at least a conspiracy against the state.

However, abolishing the state does not directly liberate people from being objects of ethical domination. The absence of legislative institutions does not prevent something similar to law from being established, if ethics itself is not liberated from those restrictions that seem to make it essentially dominating.

Most of the larger-scale examples of non-governance that we have seen recently in North Africa, the Middle East or Eastern Europe have invariably turned into factional violence and those factions have been equally—or often more—authoritarian and exclusive than the states we are living in now. Even more conscious political approaches—like Zapatista autonomy in Chiapas, Mexico—have not been able to solve the dilemma of law-constituent power, and they have fallen back upon solutions such as radical democracy, enlightened leadership, and ethical and ideological unity. The Zapatistas' way is surely a thousand times better for people in Chiapas than governance by the State of Mexico and

has a greater potential of sliding into anarchy than any European reformist movement. But still, it is a system that perceives politics as a social contract, and so lets us doubt that it has ever reached the fundamental social criticism—the criticism of ethics itself.

The desire to constitute a law is—first and foremost—the problem of ethics itself and is more precisely located in a “negativity” at the core of ethical thought as we know it. The anarchists' phrase “against all domination” clearly points out that an essential part of the struggle is to deal with the general logic of domination at all levels. So some thought is needed with the dynamite—just like a glass full of ice cubes is clearly more tasty when you pour in the whisky.

This text proposes some views concerning ethics in order to sketch an alternative understanding. The last part of the text summarizes and draws up something we could call an ‘existential introduction to barbarian theory’, that might be helpful for theorizing coming social revolution or dispersal of involuntary social bonds—however it should be called.

The doctrine of modern ethics and politics is more or less the same. The good in both contexts is understood as an absence of evil, or to be more precise, as an absence of threat and danger. This kind of concept of the good is applied everywhere in the world, and because of it, the most common political argument is based upon the real or fictional necessity of avoiding a threat or an evil—such as crisis, unemployment, poverty, war, terrorism, school shootings, natural catastrophes and so on.

This sense of the good leads to two interesting notions. First, if the good is based on absence of an evil it is “negative” by nature. Negativity here means that the good does not have any positive attributes itself except being anti-evil, a purely conceptual negation rather than anything else. The nature of the good is passive and defensive and always reactive against something that is hostile and belligerent. With this idea, we are very close to the liberal way of defining things, where all qualitative questions are privatized to an implicitly trusted third party: be it God, markets or history.

However, this leads directly to a second notion: only evil is self-contained, active and has any distinguishable qualities and its own will. Thus, an evil also has a tendency to expand and take over if not controlled or resisted. For utilitarians, pain was supposed to take over if we do not drive our own utilitarian interests.

So, we can conclude that the reactive good is actually always determined by the active evil, and evil is the only and absolute power in this world. Well, a proper question is, is it really so? Surely not, but this does not change the fact of how things are rationalized. Negative ethics is one out of many philosophical misconceptions that we have somehow managed to apply to human intelligence without any proper consideration.

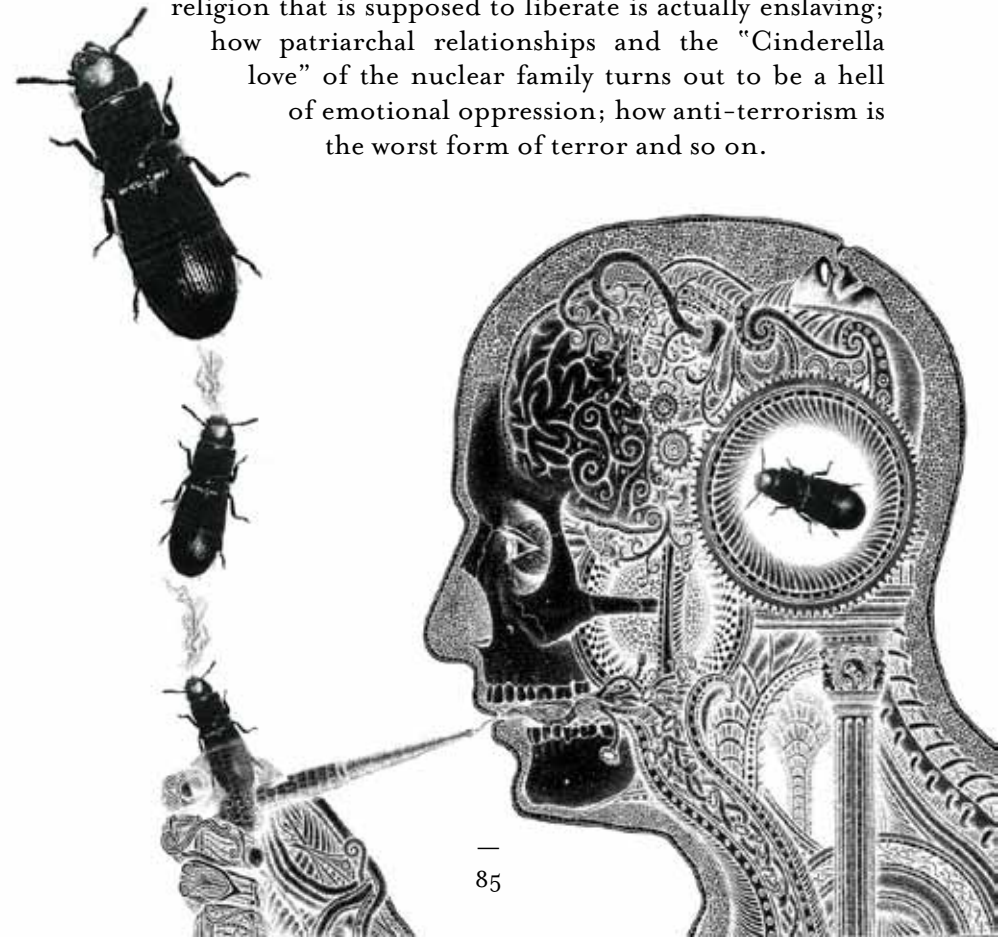
If we want to stir the soup more, we could address the question of evil to ourselves and ask: am I a subject of evil, am I striving for bad? If good is defined negatively as anti-evil, without giving any qualities to it, the evident answer to this question would be that evil does not exist as such either—it is always 'The Other'.

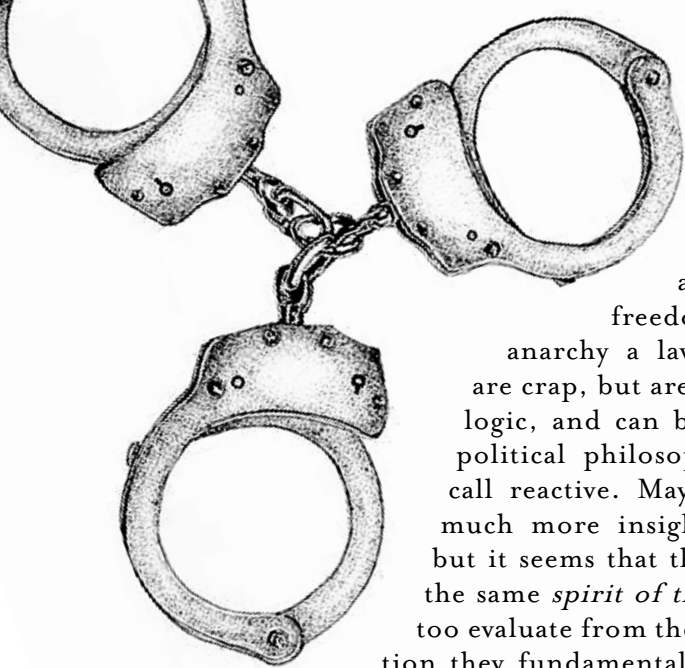
However, the big question is of the chicken and egg variety. Is life just a chain of reactions resisting the evilness of an objectively hostile world? Or, is hostility just a product of an "ethical" establishment that pursues power in a society?

Whatever label evil has—be it crisis, poverty, regression, insecurity, tyranny, savageness of nature or people's discontent—each one requires a certain opposing force or counter-party to exist. For example, the current economic crisis can only exist in an economic system that is based on a capitalist economy and all its structures: international currencies, debts, the banking system, global markets and organizations and so on. Similarly, another kind of "evil", debauchery, can exist only when there is an idea of chastity to protect, or adultery against institutional marriage and so on.

Because evil is not distinguishable from ethical virtue or a political system, we can rightly point out that the only positive and creative quality of those systems is a passion to generate their own enemies for their own justification. The parthenogenesis is "the big secret" of good and evil. And "NO" is a virgin birth of the evil or *the Other*—a self contained creature that has its own will—that without which there is no order. Does it sound biblical? Indeed. And it truly fulfils the definition of arbitrariness that is power for power's own sake—what else could a parthenogenesis be?

With these notions we are close to the classical anarchist criticism of institutions of power—although these are usually drawn up a bit differently. Anarchists frequently note that states create injustice by trying to constitute justice; how a religion that is supposed to liberate is actually enslaving; how patriarchal relationships and the "Cinderella love" of the nuclear family turns out to be a hell of emotional oppression; how anti-terrorism is the worst form of terror and so on.





But if we want this thought to be consistent and to continue with this reasoning, we must be honest and say that striving for freedom brings an order, and anarchy a law. These last arguments are crap, but are in line with the previous logic, and can be found in 17th century political philosophy, that we could now call reactive. Maybe anarchists have been much more insightful than many others, but it seems that they have been trapped in the same *spirit of their time*, insofar as they too evaluate from the very same negative position they fundamentally criticize. Well, I can't blame them, but it is time to go further.

Affirmation a.k.a. vitality of the "yes"

My perspective on the previous thoughts is that a world without the dialectical relation of positive and negative is, first of all, possible, but also necessary if we want to rid ourselves of authoritarian domination. The twisted idea of enigmatic evolution by protecting ourselves from bad is not really a problem of The World, but of those who are epistemologically dependent upon enmity and prohibition as a condition for their social status. In fact, if we look around us in order to understand what is common in the world, we merely see different forms of a stubborn life that is characterized by affirmation rather than negation—and amongst them a befuddled human being trying (equally stubbornly) to apply logical consequences and the law of non-contradiction to everything. Death is not a negation of life; just like day is not a negation of night, but one part of a long and willing continuum of highly affirmed transformations, just as it is the rotation of the globe that creates the time of the day.

Positive affirmation might sound a bit suspicious for those who are not accustomed to it. These doubts are easy to overcome by noting that affirmation has nothing to do with submission or obedience—those two are part of a dialectical logic and constitute oppression and authority just in the same way as does enmity and prohibition—nor has it to do with pacifism.

"Yes" can be said in three different ways: obediently, passively or militantly. The obedient "yes" is not an expression of one's own will, rather it resembles the "yes" one has to say before the priest when marrying; a one-sided contract that replaces oneself—and all eccentricity and mutual relations based on uniqueness and love—with the words of God, Law and Institution.

The obedient "yes" is initiation into a certain position in a hierarchy. It has nothing to do with a ritualistic playfulness, but a discipline of a play writer whose imagination is strictly limiting all improvisation. This is how a drama is invented for a lukewarm reflection of life itself. The whole cultural narrative is full of great examples, most of them masterpieces, dealing with obedience as a predominant theme of humanity. It is easy to identify with the universal human experience as a part of a too-familiar order; or to see death as a metaphor for a final resolution and liberation. Even though freedom in death is one true possibility, what we are interested in here is vitality and life, freedom in life. However, getting bogged down in the concept of obedience is of no significance for this text.

A perfect example of another way of saying "yes" is the passive affirmation of Mr. Bartleby from Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street". Bartleby is a dismal-looking but modest scrivener hired by a Manhattan lawyer. In the beginning of his job Bartleby works hard and produces a large volume of high-quality work. This goes on until the day the lawyer asks him to proof-read a document. Bartleby answers with what soon becomes his only response to any question or command: "I would prefer not to".

“I would prefer not to” is a sentence that suddenly locates Bartleby beyond the dialectics of ethics or an authoritarian order. In spite of the fact that Bartleby’s answer is systematic it seems very honest and real, and actually describes the attitude of many workers far better than a working contract.

Melville does not aid us by telling whence and why Bartleby originally comes to this statement, nor what kind of motivation moves him. This is why we have to follow his story through several scenarios where “I would prefer not to” leads to the situation in which Bartleby performs fewer and fewer tasks around the office, finally doing nothing and shrivelling like a weird grey flower.

One day the lawyer notices that Bartleby has moved in to live in the office. *The good-hearted boss*, lacking a solution, invites Bartleby to come and live with him in his own home. Bartleby, alas, “would prefer not to.” Thus, the only way is to give up and find a new place for his office and leave the poor scrivener to live in the empty estate all alone. Unfortunately, the next tenants are not so persistent with a strange guy unwilling to co-operate, so they get the police to evict him by force. This leaves Bartleby in prison, where he finally starves, having apparently preferred not to eat. The end.

It is a too hasty conclusion to say that the destiny of this very special scrivener is strictly joyless. Melville does not reveal whether the reason for Bartleby’s fading is caused by a strange way of flowering and giving fruit or just a lack of water and nutrition. Actually the story does not say anything about Bartleby’s own experience.

Even though Bartleby’s apathy is hard to bend into an ethical imperative, condemning it as suffering is a very superficial judgement too. However, what we can surely conclude is that Bartleby commanded his own bizarre destiny, and because of that he was truly free—not really an example, but still, free.

Bartleby represents an attitude that in political discourse could be related to disobedience or other reactive (stressing *re-act*) or passive tactics and even a strike—though what is important to notice and what makes Bartleby a revolutionary is his absolute inexorability, which is not comparable to any known political movement. However, that is still very far from a positive and creative morality which is actively in affirmation with the world.

An active affirmation is “yes, I surely do, but in a way I find convenient”—the emphasis being on the last part of the sentence. This kind of position despises all obedience without negating anything and allows a person to re-evaluate situations and circumstances from one’s own standpoint. A stubborn “yes”—honest to one’s own will—is the only way to think freedom.



One can imagine what it would mean to say “yes” to everything, not for the sake of obeying, but to act how one feels is best. It is hard to imagine a more tempting thought, or to avoid a whiff of a thriving force of life this kind of affirmation has. Similarly, it is impossible to avoid recognizing the obvious problems if active affirmation is limited to some sort of Darwinistic hunter-mentality.



Survivalism and the evolutionary idea of “the strongest” or “cruellest” has nothing to do with affirmation as they both are vulgarly superficial interpretations of what affirmation means. Affirmation is a *relation* and appears *with* the world not *against* the world. This makes it much more dangerous and more political than a two-sided confrontation, because it really has the potential to break structures of ideologies and hierarchy. For the same reason we see thousands of regulations and unwritten rules about what is correct, that try to prevent affirmation and avoid the inevitable change it carries with it.

It is important to be able to make a distinction between a conflict and a militant vitality. A conflict is a clear return to the dialectics of negative and positive that establish trenches. These are the monuments we see from the past: castles, fortresses, monasteries, factories, churches and other temples of the good—all those we understand as history, but this is another discussion.

For someone who cries for freedom, the struggle is always self-defense and therefore justified. However, despite the justification and the obvious importance of self-defense, it is also a way to expose a process of self-definition to the influence of “an enemy”.

The new and fresh antifascist slogan “antifascism is self-defense!” is an interesting example of this. First, I have to admit that I found the slogan quite clever when I heard it initially and it surely has been very successful in radicalizing anti-racist positions while justifying a militant attitude as self-defense among the people. However, what

The slogan “antifascism is self-defense!” popped up after the infamous Neo-Nazi attack upon the antiracist demonstration in Kärtrorp in Stockholm, December 2013, where a local antifascist stabbed one of the Nazis—as obvious self-defense—and got six and a half years in prison.

I have noticed and found problematic is a sudden need to define, and state more clearly, a certain political identity of every group—which has become as important as classifying the enemies. The obvious result is an isolation of ideological factions. This development is not necessarily very positive in the strict meaning of the word 'positive'.

Again, a joyful tragedy of militant affirmation turns into a drama, action into reaction, creation into reproduction; and we can return back to the beginning of this article and start to analyse once more how power for power's own sake will function. I stress that vitality does not mean pacifism or any other restriction of tactics—the only restrictions for life are one's own limits and desires.

Part II: A brief introduction to barbarian theory

The full content of active affirmation will appear when it is related to an idea of truth. Truth and language are bound together. Language can be used for lying, but *lying language* is not language anymore. This indicates that there is a great deal of truth in language. But what is this truth? The whole symbolic order that language requires is based on discipline and trust, in a similar way to value on the stock market. *A truth is a contract*—even though language is never exactly precise and so is never fully trustworthy. This vagueness of language is then also in the truth and so projected on the whole world.

Trust is a basic fundament of ethics and the very point that separates ethics from personal morality. In ancient Rome—to which the concept of modern law owes its foundation—the most severe crime was to break an oath. Punishment was not merely execution but expulsion from the juridical and ethical system so the offender could be killed without any legal or ethical consequences. However, the kind of trust that Romans knew—and how we know it now—cannot be built on voluntarism. That is

why there has to be another understanding of the whole epistemology of trust, and to present that, we need to introduce a *barbarian* as an oath breaker by nature.

As one who does not understand cannot be trusted but cannot lie either, the barbarian who—by definition—*does not speak the language of the polis* (city), does not stand under the same law and order that considers citizens and the polis, and makes them different from barbarians and barbarian towns. Yet the definition of a state is based on a legislation that

draws the borders and divides citizens from outsiders or those who are lawless.

For the Athenians, the polis was surely much more than a bunch of houses next to each other. It was the place of public affairs a.k.a. politics. An Athenian was in the first place a citizen, and only then a human being; they were "by nature political animals", as Aristotle wrote, deriving the word 'politics' from the presupposed sociality of human nature, subordinated to several hierarchies and other social restrictions.

The themes of this text are also meant to be contemplated inside and about the anarchist universe. I have a few very general observations in my mind. If the desire for anarchy is to liberate ourselves in order to express our heterogeneity, personality and personal morality freely, why is it that all we see is people wearing black and not really defined by their personality in any means or at least not explicitly showing it? Why are we united in a general void rather than a positive affinity and curiosity awakened by our differences?

A big part of anarchism is clearly defined by a minimum common denominator: the struggle and enmity. Unfortunately, this minimum has become an identity, a *minimum logos* that defines good and evil; political or nothing, but

political without adjectives. What is this kind of political subjectivity?

Minimization of personal characteristics (a.k.a. black bloc) used to be a tactic, now it is an anarchist fashion. Anarchism without adjectives used to be a base for co-operation, now *existence without adjectives* seems to be the definition of an anarchist (anti-) identity. How can *freedom* look and sound one and the same? Maybe there is a misunderstanding about what freedom means? Maybe we try to define it from the wrong angle—or as we say in that barbarian country I am from, maybe we are *trying to climb into a tree arse first*. Maybe the lack of positive affirmation is preventing us from radicalizing the political situation at its very basis—from how we understand ethics.

I do not look back to ancient Greece from any hellenophilic reasons or because I write this text in Athens, but because the model of antique civilization is still present in many thoughts and concepts of contemporary culture and politics. And what I am presenting here is not an historical study, but rather an allegorical essay that shamelessly uses all suitable elements from cultural history to its own end.

In Ancient Greek the word *βάρβαρος* (barbaros), "barbarian", did not only mean a stranger, but it was an antonym for *πολίτης* (polites), "citizen" (from *πόλις* – polis, "city-state"). This contrariety of citizen and barbarian shows that barbarism was never really about a foreignness or different ethnicity, but more about political subjectivity. From the perspective of a citizen, a barbarian was stateless, non-national and so non-political, and his access to the political realm of the citizen was prohibited by law. It is important to note that ideas of politics, state and nationality have always been largely incorporated in so-called 'Western Thought'.



David Graeber defines democracy not as a concrete form of government that was invented in ancient Greece but as the belief "that humans are fundamentally equal and ought to be allowed to manage their collective affairs in an egalitarian fashion using whatever means appear most conducive". For him democracy is regarded as more like a spirit or a sensitivity that is as old "as human intelligence itself". I commend Graeber for many of his theoretical

developments, but here I fully disagree. What Graeber defines as a democracy is rather one of many sorts of barbarism. A democracy is surely nothing else than "a concrete form of government that was invented in ancient Greece", recycled later by liberal nationalists, and so has never had anything to do with any egalitarian fashion.

Instead of equating democracy with some sort of *true nature of human beings*, I could call old *Athenian democracy a perverted and institutionalized form of barbarism*. This is important to notice if we want to see what a barbarian means in relation to the political body of a citizen-society.

As Plato brightly perceived, the barbarians were not a true category as they were not one homogenous group even though they were all included "under the single name of barbarians". However, the barbarians *could* have come from egalitarian societies or communities unlike citizens of the polis, who never had experienced any social equality larger than some sort of unconditional but aristocratic *φιλία* (philia), "a friendly affection".

But the cultural background of any barbarian is not as important as their presence as strangers in a highly structured social organization such as the polis—and this is their weird yet political position, which Plato seems to want to avoid by refusing to understand an essence of something that he cannot categorize. It is more substantial to think about how the barbarians reveal the arbitrariness and authoritarian structures of citizen-society, just by existing and not speaking the language of the polis.

This is how we can locate a law-destituent essence of the barbarians in language and especially in relation with the concept of *logos*, which means a rational discourse of language that separates speech from senseless noise. In ancient thought *logos* was not only a semantic term but also a major principle of politics (as a capacity to make the private public) and ethics (as a possibility to perceive difference between good and evil).

“For Aristotle, *logos* is something more refined than the capacity to make private feelings public: it enables the human being to perform as no other animal can; it makes it possible for him to perceive and make clear to others through reasoned discourse the difference between what is advantageous and what is harmful, between what is just and what is unjust, and between what is good and what is evil.”

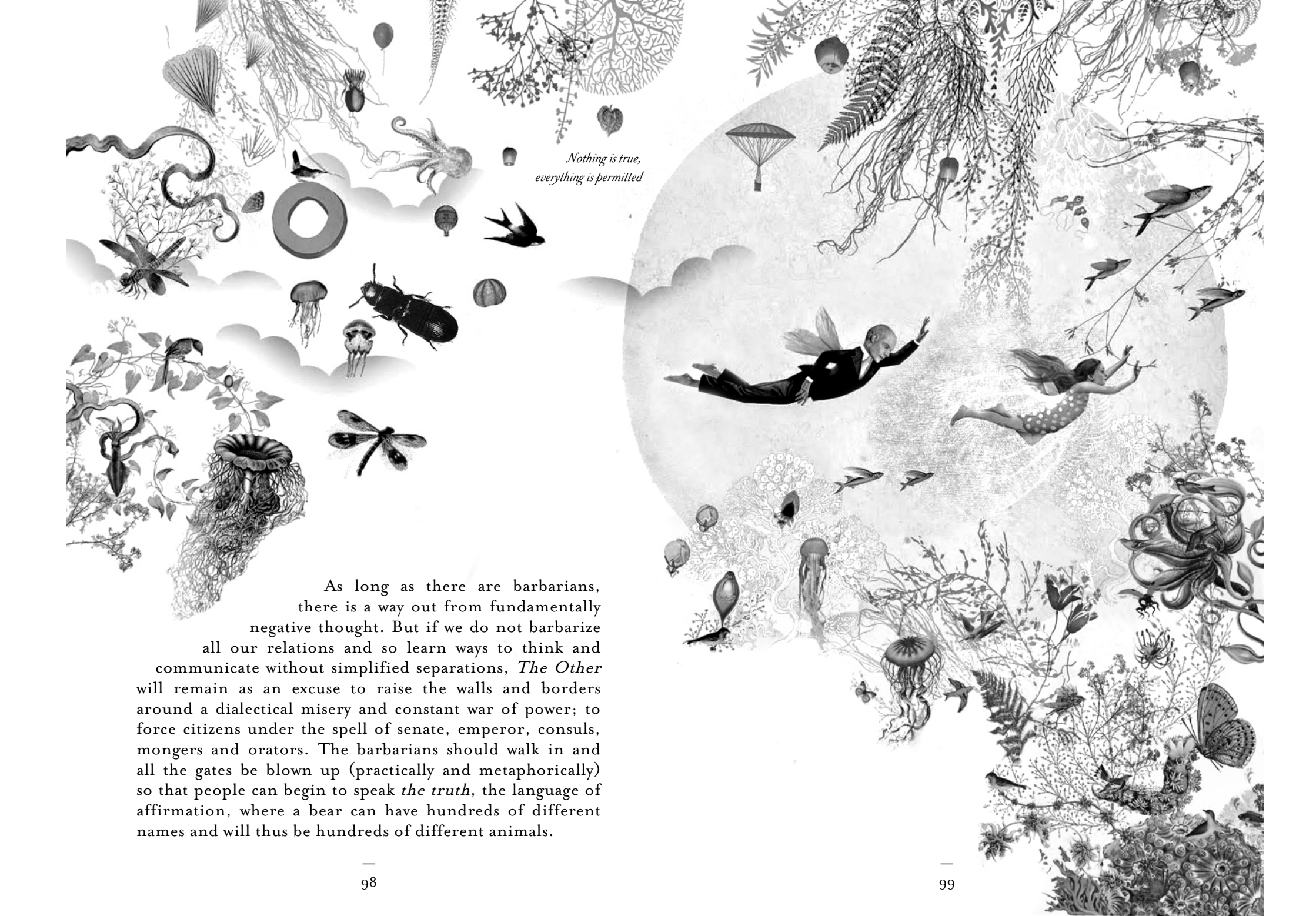
According to Aristotle, the language of the polis—based on *logos*—splits the world in two: “between what is good and what is evil” can be made clear to others. As I stated in the very beginning of this text, these two qualities create the fundamentals of modern politics. But a barbarian—who is unable to speak the language of the polis—is excluded from this kind of dialectics because of his position outside the law-constituting *logos* of the citizen-state.

However, this does not mean that a barbarian is not a human being. On the contrary, he/she is first and foremost a human, and is so more than anything else: “the man of flesh and bone; the man who is born, suffers, and dies—above all, who dies; the man who eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and thinks and wills”, and if we continue a previous quote from Miguel de Unamuno,

“the man who is seen and heard; the brother, the real brother”. Seen and heard without legislative and dividing *logos*, but through a language based on affirmation and mutual acceptance. This kind of “barbaric brother- or sisterhood” requires an Athenian or any other citizen to step outside of an identity of citizen (defined by rights and obligations) beyond the law and order where the questions of sociality and sovereignty has to be thought again from a totally new basis.

The question of barbarism is actually a question of an encounter that is not based on any negativity such as law, social status, blood, nationality, religion, ideology or some other artificial unity, but voluntariness, mutuality, desire, curiosity, challenge and other forms of positive affirmation, and treated in the same manner: with hospitality, manslaughter or true revolution (that is inevitably not a question about the means of production but a highly existential one). Sounds dramatic, but it is not. It is rather a tragedy, where “the hero is joyful, this is what has, up to now, escaped the authors of tragedies”, as Nietzsche understood.





*Nothing is true,
everything is permitted*

As long as there are barbarians, there is a way out from fundamentally negative thought. But if we do not barbarize all our relations and so learn ways to think and communicate without simplified separations, *The Other* will remain as an excuse to raise the walls and borders around a dialectical misery and constant war of power; to force citizens under the spell of senate, emperor, consuls, mongers and orators. The barbarians should walk in and all the gates be blown up (practically and metaphorically) so that people can begin to speak *the truth*, the language of affirmation, where a bear can have hundreds of different names and will thus be hundreds of different animals.